

EAT, PRAY, NACHES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Waverley Council, NSW

PETER BERGER: Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Peter Berger

Interviewer: Ashley Roan

Interview Date: 18 May 2015

Interview Location: Vaucluse

Transcribed by and date: 5 July 2015

Copyright: Waverley Council

Interviewer: **The first thing we're going to cover is your life before you came to Australia and your settlement in the local Waverley Council area. Can you start off by letting me know your name and when and where you were born?**

Peter Berger: My name's Peter Berger. I was born on 9th of March, 1951 in Budapest, Hungary.

Interviewer: **What was happening in your country and what were the circumstances that led you to leaving?**

Peter Berger: Both my parents are Holocaust survivors, so they came back from the war and they settled into life in Hungary. In the mid 50s Russia decided to invade Hungary [in 1956] and that was the incentive for us to leave in a hurry. The borders opened for a couple of days and everybody just went for it as quickly as possible, got out, left everything behind and made their way to free land, somewhere where we could have freedom and democracy. After the Holocaust, another thing like the revolution was the final straw for many people.

Interviewer: **I suppose there was some very bad memories that people held and they feared the worst such as fear of violence.**

Peter Berger: Yes. After the violence of the Holocaust and the tanks rolled in and the fighting started. It actually started in Budapest, it was a shocking reminder of what happened 10 years earlier.

Interviewer: **How did you leave and who helped you get to Australia?**

Peter Berger: That's interesting. Most people got a local person, say a truck driver or a van driver. We found one, gave him all our money, and he took us to the border at night - it was still dangerous, things could happen. So he took us to the Austrian border and he dropped us within a couple kilometres of the border. It was winter, there was snow. We walked probably for a few hours and there was a safe house across the border and we were safe there - my mother and my father and my brother, and my grandmother. She was very elderly so it was a struggle to get through.

We split up just halfway through the three hour crossing and we met on the other side. There were people there to look after us as soon as we got over. But the van driver, he just dropped us, took every cent we had and off he went.

We were happy to be on the other side. When we got to the other side there was support for Jewish people. There was a Jewish Agency and they looked after you, put us up in six star hotels. I don't know but I think it was money from the American Jewish community. We

stayed there and I think from there, probably tried to find how to get a boat to Australia. We caught a boat from one of the Italian ports and the whole boat was full of Hungarians which was interesting.

Interviewer: **Why did you choose Australia in particular?**

Peter Berger: There weren't many choices. We wanted to come to Australia. Most people wanted to go to America, but America was very hard to get into. We wanted to come here because my mother had two sisters here so it was an easy choice for us. They were already here for a few years so we came here to join them. That was our incentive. And we heard about Australia. It was good country.

Interviewer: **Is the question about a visa relevant here, or not really?**

Peter Berger: I'm not sure but I think as refugees, think Australia gave us the push along. I don't know about the visa. I think it was easy to get in. I'm not sure of that part of the story.

Interviewer: **Okay. How did you find somewhere to stay when you first got here?**

Peter Berger: When we arrived, we moved in with one of the sisters and her family. We stayed for a few weeks until we found accommodation in Bronte Road at Bondi Junction. My father got a job on the second day he arrived. There was no dole then. That's how we started. My parents went to work, my brother and I went to school, learned the language very quickly, it was amazing. I can't remember not being able to speak English. We crossed the road to Waverley Public School and that was it.

Interviewer: **Why do you think this area was chosen as opposed to other areas around the city?**

Peter Berger: Good question. I'm not sure of the exact reason. I think it was just ... the community was here already. The two sisters were here and I think the community was already starting here. Bondi Beach was close by and that was an attraction.

Interviewer: **That's okay. What were your first impressions of the area when you first moved here?**

Peter Berger: As a six year old, I thought it was fantastic. School was across the road and we just walked across the road and we loved it straightaway. The beach was five minutes away. It was wonderful, immediately fell in love.

Interviewer: **Had you seen a beach previously?**

Peter Berger: No no no. There's no beaches in Hungary. Just lakes. No, I don't think I'd seen a beach but I loved it straightaway.

Interviewer: Cast your mind back to when you were six. What did it actually feel like when you first arrived? Obviously there were. How did you really adapt to those changes?

Peter Berger: Yeah, my first impression, the change was immediately to a larger family. We had nobody back home, everybody was here, so that was nice. I had cousins and aunties and uncles. That was beautiful, and I loved the school. I loved just a different way of life.

The emphasis on the sport. I'm a sport lover and straightaway we were playing cricket and soccer and athletics, and it was just a beautiful free country. For a six year old, that's all you want.

Interviewer: That's hopefully you want it still.

Peter Berger: Yes. Still. For sure.

Interviewer: Can you talk about some of the challenges that you and your family had when you first arrived in Australia?

Peter Berger: Starting with nothing the challenge was to make a living and find a place to live. There were other challenges with people. People were different, we were different. That was a challenge a little bit. Nothing major but you had to get accustomed to a different way of life, and different people and different habits. It was good. That was a little minor challenge, I wouldn't say major.

The language seemed to come easy. We learned English very easily. We just became accustomed to things but we stayed Hungarian in our habits for a long time. The challenge was to mix a bit with other people.

Interviewer: What did your parents do to make ends meet back then?

Peter Berger: As soon as they could, they started a business. I don't know why, but they started a restaurant at Bondi Beach because they had no idea: my mother said she couldn't cook, she couldn't bake. All they could do was work very hard. And we started a little restaurant at Bondi Beach on Campbell Parade in 1958 and just started with basics.

Within no time we hired the right people like good chefs and it became almost like an icon quite quickly. The other immigrants needed somewhere to go to eat because they were also working nonstop. They had no time to cook so they came to us very often to

have dinner. Some people came almost every night to have dinner with their family.

Interviewer: **That first restaurant was The Chocolate Den, wasn't it?**

Peter Berger: To make ends meet, they decided to buy a restaurant on Bondi Beach. This restaurant was actually owned by three Greek brothers. It was called The Chocolate Den. My father's occupation was confectioner, so that's where they thought they'd start.

So they bought that and he continued the chocolate lines, but it wasn't really successful. Then they started the restaurant side of it, the kitchen side. We hired good chefs and it went from there to be very successful.

Later on, another branch started in the business. My mother started to bake a couple of cakes and make a couple strudels every day or two. That seemed to become more and more popular. So, again we hired ... there were immigrants coming from Europe all the time and we had the opportunity to hire some top pastry cooks and chefs. So we hired a very good pastry cook from Hungary and he developed a range and started what today are the famous Gelato Bar cakes and they became a major part of our business. Still famous. The kitchen, that was another side, it was like two businesses in one.

We changed the name to the Gelato Bar. The chocolates weren't going so well and my father could also make gelatos, he was very good at that. We renovated the shop into the latest looking café you could see and he started making gelatos and we changed the name to the Gelato Bar and we went from there.

It seems like a strange name, but somehow it seemed like the right one at the time. Gelatos weren't so common then although there was an Italian community, but we were doing something different. We thought that it'd be just interesting to call it Gelato Bar.

That became so successful, the gelatos. People were lining all the way down the street. Like Messina. For gelatos.

Interviewer: **What else was on the menu in the cafe? You were mentioning before there was just a lot of home cooked food so can you comment about that?**

Peter Berger: The kitchen, the food that we produced was like home cooking from Eastern Europe or Hungary with a bit of a Jewish twist to it as well. Not just twist, there were Jewish items, Hungarian food like matzoh dumpling soup, chicken soup, goulash, cabbage rolls, and paprika chicken with nockerl and meatloaf. This was what the community

wanted - they were familiar with these foods. Not just Hungarian people, the Polish Jewish people, everybody loved it. That was fantastic, that went well for us. That was very successful.

Interviewer: **Why do you think the local area was such a popular place for settlement of Jewish people?**

Peter Berger: I think it's like all communities, when someone came, everybody followed, and just the numbers. That's what made it strong and made people feel comfortable and they could eat and buy things they were familiar with. There were other Jewish stores in the area. That's what made it successful, just the strength in numbers and reminders of what they used to eat back home. I think they were very happy.

Interviewer: **How do you think the Jewish community has shaped the local area?**

Peter Berger: Jewish people have a sense of tradition, and they take on the country where they live. They continue their religion and they continue their traditions and they try to better the general community and the country that they migrate to. I think it's been a very positive thing for our area and that's why it looks so great.

Interviewer: **How do you think the Jewish community has shaped you as an individual?**

Peter Berger: My family is very traditionally Jewish and I'm very proud of my history, and I always remember what we've gone through and my parents and everybody has gone through being Jewish and I feel as though that's what made me stronger. I've tried to continue those traditions as best I can and pass them on to my children and I think that's made me a good person and a better person.

Interviewer: **How is your sense of culture and lifestyle changed through living in Australia?**

Peter Berger: It's easy to take on the Aussie lifestyle, it's just so comfortable, relaxing, easy-going. I've kept a bit of the old and I've taken that on too. I've tried to continue my Jewishness not that that's waned, but maybe a little bit. The atmosphere in Australia is easy to take on and I think I've moulded into it myself. I'm an Aussie!

Interviewer: **Did school influence you much in picking up a bit of the Australian way?**

Peter Berger: Australia is a very multicultural society and I've loved that - I've really enjoyed it. I grew up with a lot of Greek kids and Italian and Europeans and Aussies and I love that diverse multicultural thing in our society. It's just a good way of life.

Interviewer: **We're going to move on to some food related questions. Of course food is an important part of the Jewish culture. Can you tell me about Hungarian foods and a memory about eating your favourite food when you were a child?**

Peter Berger: Traditional Hungarian food is really, it's about soup, lots of soup. Heavy soups for winter. The main courses can be cabbage rolls or chicken or heavy meat dishes. It's perfect for that type of climate. I love the cabbage rolls and I love soup too. The desserts are a very big part of the Hungarian cuisine or kitchen - many different cakes and desserts and pastries. It's a big part of our kitchen and I love it. And still eat it once in a while.

Interviewer: **Tell me about one favourite food that you used to eat as a child?**

Peter Berger: My favourite food is plum dumplings. It's like a dumpling made of pastry, but inside there's a plum, with cinnamon and sugar. My mother makes it, still makes it, on every one of my birthdays. It's beautiful ... It's a dessert, it's quite heavy, and it's covered in icing, sugar, and bread crumbs. It's a strange dessert, but it's fantastic. I love it. Can't eat more than a couple though.

Interviewer: **Sounds delicious.**

Peter Berger: Yeah.

Interviewer: **When you eat something now, what dish triggers memories of your native country or childhood and why?**

Peter Berger: Soup, I love soup. Whatever soup I'm eating, it just brings back memories because it's a big part of Hungarian meals. Dinner is very often a soup and a dessert, there's not always a main course. The soups are a big part of the kitchen and that always triggers good memories.

Interviewer: **What did you think of the food in Australia when you first arrived and how has it changed?**

Peter Berger: The food in Australia has changed a lot. I can't believe how far it's gotten. When we came here, it was difficult to eat anything out apart from at home. Today it's changed remarkably, we've got a completely diverse number of restaurants from all different areas. I guess that's because of the migration we've had and I love that we've got the top restaurants in the world, in my opinion.

Interviewer: **How do you think your migration wave has influenced food in the local area?**

Peter Berger: It did influence it a lot. I think Hungarian food is not as popular as it used to be because as the older generation die out, the younger generation are looking for a different kind of foods like Asian. But it's still there, it's still popular. There's still quite a few European or Hungarian restaurants in our area so it must be still popular I guess.

Interviewer: Tell me about some special that foods you prepare or eat during family get-togethers or Jewish holidays.

Peter Berger: Okay. In different holidays, we have different foods. There's Passover, we have the matzoh balls with the chicken soup and we have fried potatoes because you can't have bread. There's another meal we have which is a well-known dish - we have it on the New Year, Rosh Hashanah, it's called cholent. It's smoked beans with beef in it. It's a very traditional and usual meal but we love to eat it once a year. It's baked in the oven for 10 hours and it's really nice.

Interviewer: Who taught you how to cook?

Peter Berger: I love to cook. Well, I worked in the restaurant myself for 40 years, so I learned a lot from the chefs. I didn't actually cook in the restaurant, but I did learn a lot and today I'm still cooking at home, quite often. Not always Hungarian. Sometimes Asian.

Interviewer: Are there recipes that are passed on through the generations in your family?

Peter Berger: Yes, we've got the cakes - we're still continuing those recipes which are passed on. My mum has become quite a good cook and she's passed on a few of her specialties which we try to make once in a while.

My mother's quite elderly so we've organised once a month to go there and my daughter will cook the Hungarian style food for all of us. My mum's going to teach her although she knows quite a lot already and we're going to do that once a month. I think that will continue the tradition.

Interviewer: I just want to go back to the Gelato Bar. Can you tell me about how the Gelato Bar became a hub for the community?

Peter Berger: Yes. The Gelato Bar became a very big hub for the community and it centred around the soccer. We had a soccer club called Hakoah. People regularly met at our Gelato Bar there, had their meal and discuss the match. They'd come there before the match, have their lunch and after the match, they'd come back for some dessert, or dinner. They'd discuss every kick, every shot, every free kick, and it was a wonderful place to me.

I didn't really realise it until now, how good it was. The memory of those events that happened around the soccer is incredible. The players often came down, it was just fantastic. The people loved it. They had nothing else really except work and soccer. Work, soccer. Work, soccer. Our restaurant was a big part of it. I loved it, it was just phenomenal.

Interviewer: **The essence of Judaism is in its rituals and observances. In this section we would love to hear about the *mitzvot* - what's the difference between a *mitzvah* and Bar Mitzvah?**

Peter Berger: It's the same word but Bar Mitzvah is when someone is 13, they have their celebration and they say their prayers at the synagogue. *Mitzvah* is someone does a good deed is a *mitzvah*. A good deed is a *mitzvah*, I think.

Interviewer: **Okay. How do your religious practices now compare to before you migrated.**

Peter Berger: I mean, I was five. My parents were quite religious back in Hungary - they kept Sabbath and a kosher home. When they came to Australia, things changed a little bit. We still were very traditionally Jewish and we kept the major holydays quite strictly and all the celebrations but we didn't keep a kosher home. But you can't class us as religious anymore, so it did change as soon as we came to Australia.

Interviewer: **You don't attend synagogue? If you do, how often and can you tell me a little bit about your congregation?**

Peter Berger: Yes. I'm a member of the Chabad Synagogue in Double Bay. It's quite a religious synagogue and that suits me even though I don't quite fit into the mould of the synagogue. We go on the major holydays as well - the New Year, the day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and maybe a few other days during the year. Sometimes the synagogue calls me when they need a minyan - you need 10 to form a quorum to say prayers – so I'll go more often during the year if they need the numbers. But apart from that, we keep just the major holydays and I enjoy it.

Interviewer: **What learnings, beliefs and traditions do you feel are most important or that you're most passionate about?**

Peter Berger: I believe very strongly in tradition and to remember our history and what we've gone through - just the principles of Judaism which I believe in strongly. That's what I try to live by.

Interviewer: **How does it feel to belong to a group of people with common history and traditions?**

Peter Berger: I love it. I wouldn't be anything else but Jewish. I think it's in every part of me and I feel very strongly about it. Maybe it's a connection to the Holocaust maybe it's a connection to what my family and we have all been through and that makes me feel very strongly about being Jewish.

Interviewer: What Jewish traditions have your parents and grandparents passed on to you?

Peter Berger: My parents have passed on just a very traditional way of life and never to move away from that. Not be religious but just to keep and be part of the community, be a member of a synagogue and that's probably it. That I feel is a minimum but it's quite enough.

Interviewer: Accordingly, what traditions are you passing on or have you passed on to your own children and grandchildren?

Peter Berger: For my children I try to continue the tradition ... we keep Friday night, the Sabbath. The family gets together with my wife's family and the children and every Friday night we have the Sabbath meal. All the major holydays, we get together with all the family. That's what I try to pass on to the kids and hope they continue it on one day.

Interviewer: What do you think is the best thing about being Jewish in the Waverley area?

Peter Berger: The best thing about being Jewish in the Waverley area is that there's quite a few of us and the general community is accepting of us and we have our synagogues there and that's just a comfortable feeling of being Jewish and Australian and a member of the whole community.

Interviewer: Do you think Bondi has become a melting pot for different cultures and has this influenced the character of the local area?

Peter Berger: I think Bondi has changed a lot. I don't think it's become a melting pot for the cultures anymore. It was and it's just moving away to just more of a general Australian area. It's still beautiful, it's still got the history and the memories but it's not a melting pot. Although there are communities there but I think it's becoming less and less so.

Interviewer: The next thing that we're going to discuss *naches*. Every Jewish person wants *naches* in their life and *naches* can also be seen as success in learning and giving back to the community. What does the word *naches* mean to you and does it have a special significance?

Peter Berger: *Naches* means to me, joy and happiness and pride. It's probably connected with family or children, something that they give you when

they've done something good or achieved something. For me, that's what *naches* is, pride and joy.

Interviewer: **How would you describe *naches* to someone who doesn't know what it means?**

Peter Berger: I think it's a selfless kind of feeling you get when someone close to you does something special and gives you joy and sense of happiness. They've achieved something, and maybe you've achieved something.

Interviewer: **What do you hope for your children and grandchildren?**

Peter Berger: For my grandchildren and children I hope to continue our Jewishness and health and happiness and tradition and just to always remember and never forget. Just love what you are and remember your history.

Interviewer: **Tell us about a time when you've given your parents or grandparents *naches*.**

Peter Berger: I think I gave my parents *naches* when I had my Bar Mitzvah, when I got married and when I had children. Their *naches* in my children and their achievements has been wonderful and I've loved it and been proud of it. They get *naches* too when they see me continuing Judaism.

Also I used to be a fairly successful soccer player. I played for Hakoah and they were very proud of me I hope. They used to come to all the matches and watch me all the time.

Interviewer: **Peter, what is your biggest achievement in life? What would you chalk up to your biggest achievement and why?**

Peter Berger: My biggest achievement, I think, was joining my dad when I was 18. My father had a friend who was a builder, I was going to join him in that industry. But within a couple of weeks, my father had a heart attack and I had to join in the business ... I wanted to. I enjoyed it very much. I helped my parents a lot. We were successful there, continued the success and I stayed there for 30 something years and I'm proud of that. That's my biggest achievement. Apart from finding my wife on Bondi. Is that an achievement?

Interviewer: **What activities are you involved in for the wider community that also brings you *naches*?**

Peter Berger: I'm a very big supporter of general community fundraising events, whether it's for the synagogue or the local JCA [Jewish Communal Appeal], JNF [Jewish National Fund]. I support them, but personally

I'm not a big worker in that area, but I do support all the community events financially. I'm happy to do that all the time.

When I worked at the Gelato Bar, we regularly had schools or organisations requesting some support, like a dinner for two or financial support and we supported them regularly. Schools, fundraising, fetes and things like that. Anybody that came in the door usually got a big yes and support. That's what I like to do.

Interviewer: **That's very generous.**

Peter Berger: Thank you.

Interviewer: **Finally how do you feel about your place, not just in the Jewish community, but the community overall?**

Peter Berger: I think by running a successful business which was for the whole community. Everybody still talks about it and asks me about it and remember it and that reminds me how great it was, I think it was something we can all say it was a great thing. It's something everybody remembers and I'm so proud that we were there and did it and succeeded and the memories for everyone is fantastic.

Interviewer: **All right, because we've finished the formal part of all the questions, we were going to explore the story about how you two met and fell in love.**

Peter Berger: One of the special things that happened to me in my life was meeting my wife. Another icon on Bondi Beach was Vallis'. It was like a milk bar, a pinball parlour where all the Jewish kids would meet in winter or summer.

In summer we'd go to the beach, in winter we'd hang around all weekend, sip the booze at the pinball machine and one day I was playing pinball and this beautiful olive skinned girl just stopped to watch me playing the pinballs and that's when I met my wife. I was 17 and she was 15. We're still together and I still love her very much.

Just the memories of the Gelato Bar are wonderful. The shame of the whole thing is the memories are great but I didn't realise it then when it was happening. Only now I just realised how I miss it very much and how great it was and how special it was. I'll never forget the Gelato Bar and all the fun we had.

Interviewer: **It's very unusual that you meet someone that doesn't have a Gelato Bar story.**

Peter Berger: That's true.

Interviewer: In some way or another the Gelato Bar touched people's lives, like yourself. Right? Everybody who is above 30, somehow they have a Gelato Bar story, and I think it's fantastic.

Peter Berger: It was good.

Interviewer: It had such an impact on the whole community not just the Jewish community. I guess that's why it's an icon.

Peter Berger: Everything has an end I guess. A beginning and an end. Sad, but that's the truth, yeah.

Interviewer: It's more like a new beginning isn't it?

Peter Berger: A new beginning. It's going to be an English fish and chip café. There's already two of them, one in Randwick next to the movies at the Spot and one in Bronte Road Bondi Junction. An Irish guy. And he bought this business and he's turning it into a café.

Interviewer: I was talking more about moving into Westfield.

Peter Berger: Well, I'd had enough. I said to my mum, "I did it for 40 years. I've got to stop this."

I had to stop this. It was enough. After 40 years I'd had enough. It's a very hard business, the restaurant business. It's full-on, nonstop, there's no letup, the pressure - that was enough. Not many people do it for 40 years. I think from the time we started in 1958 until this year. That's nearly 60 years. It's a lot. It's almost 60 years. It's incredible, yeah.